

‘The sense of helplessness is more of a choice than a reality, in my opinion’

James Kelman in dialogue with Noam Chomsky

James Kelman: As in the UK there are many people in the United States who are ashamed and outraged by the actions of their government; some repudiate these actions, try to work against them. There is a wider sense of helplessness. This was also apparent in the period following the electoral debacle in Florida and the appointment of G.W. Bush to the Presidency. It gives rise to a self-deprecatory humour. People poke fun at

their own sterility and uselessness in the face of the US State or ‘the political machine’. People avoid culpability, wanting to believe that they have no control over what is happening in their name. At the same time they are unwilling to concede – especially

to outsiders – that they are excluded from the power structure. They rather believe they have separated themselves from power, that they have conceded democratic rights, and conferred upon authority the privilege to do what it likes. Is this purely a middle class European-American phenomenon? What happens when so-called ‘radical’ sections of society do fight back? There has been a strong radical tradition in the United States. In the 19th- and early part of the 20th-century this was battered into submission by the combined power of big business and the US state; and again from the 1960s and early 1970s.

Noam Chomsky: This is, I think, a recurrent cycle. There are regular periods of euphoria about ‘the end of history’ in a utopia for the masters, with the population subdued and

marginalised, but some refused to submit, and shortly after were vindicated by new and more vibrant popular movements. A classic example was in the 1880s, when William Morris outraged an Oxford audience by stating that: ‘I know it is at present the received opinion that the competitive or “Devil take the hindmost” system is the last system of economy which the world will see; that it is perfection, and therefore finality

has been reached in it; and it is doubtless a bold thing to fly in the face of this opinion, which I am told is held even by the most learned men’, but if history really is at an end, as confidently proclaimed, then ‘civilization will die’, and all of history



Kelman and Chomsky in ‘The Black Man’ in Govan in 1990. Note George Davie, Philosopher, top right.

says it is not so, he concluded. Rightly, as was soon discovered. That’s not the first time, or the last. Furthermore, the cycle is generally upward. It’s true that popular movements have been beaten into submission since the first modern democratic revolution in 17th-century England, when people called for rights that have still not been won. But their struggle left a residue, and raised the level from which later struggle could take place. As more freedom and rights are won, new methods are contrived to cage ‘the great beast’, as Alexander Hamilton called the people. There’s no more reason than in Morris’s day, or in the 1920s, or 1950s, to accept the doctrines of ‘the most learned men’.

The sense of helplessness is more of a choice than a reality, in my opinion.



James Kelman: I heard somebody laugh and say: 'We must be about the most foolish people ever to have graced the earth.' This was around the same day that G.W. Bush declared the US military the greatest force for justice that the world has ever known. On national television a famous comedian got much laughter with the comment that 'we' must be the only people on earth who ever flew into someone else's country and dropped bombs from the front end of the plane while from the back 'we' let loose parcels of food. This humour is surely structured on supremacy. There are few taboos. Almost anything foreign is open to a ridicule which masquerades as 'healthy scepticism' and people congratulate each other for using it. Those who criticise this are themselves ridiculed. Similar attacks take place on areas of United States society that lie outside the dominant European-American culture.

Noam Chomsky: Even in totalitarian societies, satirists have had a certain space in which to articulate popular attitudes and concerns. Even more so in more free societies. It can be an evasion, but it can also be more significant. It depends on how others make use of the opportunities opened in this way.

James Kelman: Some speak of class and hierarchy as the English disease. But among European-Americans this 'disease' is also discernible. For example some of the US state's 'bad decisions' – presumably including barbaric acts of terrorism – are the result of a kind of ham-fisted lack of sophistication. How could we expect anything else from a boy from Texas?

Noam Chomsky: When things go awry, self-designated 'respectable sectors' will seek to lay the blame on people who they can dismiss as beneath them in culture and sophistication. The architects of the 'bad decisions' are not 'boys from Texas' – and this 'boy from Texas' was born to wealth and power, attended an elite university, joined a secret society where he was taught the manners of the rich and powerful and established the right contacts for his future career, which was based on constant intervention of sectors of great privilege and power. Rather, the architects are basically the same as in other administrations,

including 'the best and the brightest' of the Kennedy years, at the extreme opposite end of the very narrow political spectrum.

James Kelman: US figures of authority, whether political, religious or military, use the term 'American' to signify a quality of being greater than 'human': to say of someone s/he is an American is to say that s/he is a greater than normal human being. However, the term 'American' is itself exclusive. European-Americans do not describe themselves as 'European-Americans', they describe themselves as 'Americans'. They distinguish 'Americans' from Native-Americans, African-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Asian-Americans, etc.

Noam Chomsky: The term 'American' is of course problematic. It is difficult to avoid: the counterpart of 'United Statesians' is commonly used in Latin America (when they are being polite), but it doesn't work well in English. The term 'Northamerican' won't work either for obvious reasons. But apart from minor linguistic difficulties, the term does convey a kind of imperial arrogance, and a special status for immigrants from Europe. That goes far back. In the 19th century there was a ridiculous ideology tracing the wonders of America to their 'Anglo-Saxon origins', no comment necessary.

It's worth noting that those counted today as unhyphenated 'Americans' include some of the most viciously repressed immigrants: Irish, 'Huns' (from Eastern Europe), Wops, Kikes, etc. They may choose the hyphen today, but as a term of pride, not exclusion.

James Kelman: The dominant European-American culture believes itself the pinnacle of humanity, that the history of the world has led to them. This culture is superior to the rest of the planet. The superiority is self-evident and the rest of humanity know it though they may not admit it. If pressed on the latter they may backtrack to the extent that when they said the rest of the world they meant the rest of the European world and were not especially including the rest of the planet Earth. The rest of the planet is not especially relevant.

Noam Chomsky: That is one of the prerogatives of power, and of the success of



violence. I suspect it is close to a historical universal.

James Kelman: It is assumed that the rest of the planet wants to emigrate to the USA, particularly the entire population of China. European-Americans appear to believe that their country offers the supreme welfare safety-net.

Noam Chomsky: There is some objective reality to the belief. By the 18th-century, the English colonies were by some measures among the richest parts of the world. As they exterminated or expelled the native population, they had enormous advantages, not even closely matched elsewhere. By the late 19th-century the US was by far the major industrial economy of the world, as well as its leading agricultural producer. After World War II, the US had about half the world's wealth, as well as incomparable security and military force. If natural advantages are taken into account, the US should be far and away the richest country of the world, with the highest quality of life for the entire population. The extent to which it falls short of that – which is substantial – is an index of the failures of the socioeconomic system and its dominant elements. One measure of the desire to immigrate to the US is given by Puerto Rico, the one part of Latin America from which immigration is not constrained (apart from Cuba, a special case, reflecting the fanatic dedication to punish Cuba for what secret documents call its 'successful defiance' of the ruler of the hemisphere). Puerto Rico has an artificially inflated standard of living, for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, probably close to half the population has come to the US, where many live in poverty and at the margins of society. The relation of the US to Latin America is not unlike that of Europe and Africa, and for somewhat similar reasons. Not attractive ones, to put it mildly.

James Kelman: Is the US a democracy? What do we mean by 'democracy'? In the set of interviews published as *9/11* you referred to one act of terror perpetrated against the people of Sudan by the US State. This was the 'destruction of the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant' in 1998, bombed out of existence by the Clinton government. Who knows how many will have died as a result. Some estimate a figure in 'the tens of thousands'. You upset western commentators by referring to this extraordinarily brutal act alongside the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. From their response you infer that at some deep level, however they may deny it to themselves, they regard our crimes against the weak to be

as normal as the air we breathe. Our crimes, for which we are responsible: as taxpayers, for failing to provide massive reparations, for granting refuge and immunity to the perpetrators, and for allowing the terrible facts to be sunk deep in the memory hole.

But is there a point we can distinguish between the state and the people? The people of the US are here accountable for the actions of their government. No tax-payer is let off the hook. But what is possible?

Noam Chomsky: The only credible estimates we have of death toll is tens of thousands (the German Ambassador to the Sudan, in the *Harvard International Review*; the regional program manager of the respected Near East Foundation, with field experience in the Sudan, in the *Boston Globe*; that a humanitarian catastrophe was likely was anticipated by Human Rights Watch from the moment of the bombing, for good reasons). The matter is of course not investigated: the powerful have no need to investigate their own crimes, at least, as long as the intellectuals maintain the standard posture of cowardice and subordination to power. The reaction would be different if, say, al-Qaeda were to destroy the major source of pharmaceutical supplies in the US, or England, or Israel, or some other place that matters. The reaction to my mention of it is instructive. I described the attack on the World Trade Center as a 'major atrocity', carried out with 'wickedness and awesome cruelty', but I added that it was by no means unique in scale, mentioning the Sudan bombing, but with no further comment. That elicited enormous fury, quite naturally: the atrocities that WE carry out against THEM are not to be compared with what THEY do to US. Again, probably a historical universal. Even the term 'terror' is restricted to THEIR terror against US. Long before 9/11, I had elicited much the same reactions by using the official US definitions of 'terror' in reviewing the 'war on terror' declared by the Reagan administration – the current incumbents and their mentors – in 1981. The immediate consequences of the use of the official definition are hardly obscure, but utterly intolerable to deeply indoctrinated intellectuals.

One cannot fairly blame the people of the United States in this case. They are carefully protected from awareness of any of these crimes. True, the facts are technically available – as just noted. But they are effectively concealed, and those who have the privilege and ability – and therefore the responsibility – to inform the public much prefer to admire themselves



for their extraordinary courage in condemning someone else's crimes, while suppressing their own, a historic task of the intellectual classes, with only marginal exceptions.

A lot is possible. Quite commonly activist movements have escaped the doctrinal controls and helped create quite broad understanding of criminal acts of state and other power systems, and strong resistance to them. The Vietnam war is a dramatic illustration. Among the articulate intellectuals, one would have to go far from the mainstream to find any principled criticism: after many years of war, when South Vietnam was virtually destroyed and the attack had spread to the rest of Indochina, one began to hear twitters of protest about how the noble endeavour was a 'mistake' which was becoming far too costly (mostly to the US). At the same time, about 70% of the population regarded the war as 'fundamentally wrong and immoral, not a mistake'. Precisely what people mean by these attitudes – which persist until the present – is not entirely clear, because scholarly inquiries into public attitudes do not pursue the question any further, taking for granted that the responses mean that people object to US casualties. Conceivable, but hardly the obvious interpretation.

Over time, there is a notable improvement in the level of civilization of the general public, with quite striking signs, including recent years. Much that was considered perfectly acceptable only a few years ago is intolerable today. There is a long way to go, needless to say, but also a record of success on which to build further.

This conversation was undertaken by e-mail as part of a wider set of author-led interviews for Hamish Hamilton, who publish both authors. The point of the project was to have writers interview each other, and where possible to match authors who would tend to have certain things in common even if they worked in different areas or genres. Beginning as an idea of Hamish Hamilton Commissioning Editor Simon Prosser's, the dialogue was facilitated and developed by Jerome de Groot with the help of staff at Hamish Hamilton. James Kelman submitted a selection of questions that Noam Chomsky answered, and then there were subsequent exchanges which have been briefly edited here. The process of the interview took about two weeks in June 2004. It is published in The Drouth for the first time courtesy of both authors.

