Remarks on the historical context of the essay ‘The Responsibility of Intellectuals’

Noam Chomsky

These remarks are from a conference held at UCL on 25 February 2017. The event commemorated the 50th anniversary of the publication of ‘The Responsibility of Intellectuals’.

Let me give a little bit of the background. The essay itself was really a talk given in early 1966, about a year before it appeared, to a student group at Harvard University, which published a student journal. The journal was Mosaic, the periodical – believe it or not – of the Harvard Hillel Society. This was pre-1967, and things were very different. This was one of a constant stream of talks, often many a day, to all kinds of audiences. It began pretty much when John F. Kennedy escalated the war in Vietnam in 1961–62.

Since this talk happened to be at Harvard, it was particularly important to focus on intellectual elites and their relation to government. The reason was that the Harvard faculty was quite prominent in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. The National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy, was a former dean at Harvard; many other faculty were either in the administration or travelled back regularly from Cambridge to Washington. And the spirit of Camelot reigned at Harvard – as in fact it still does. That was the reason for the particular focus of the talk, different from other talks at the time.

I should perhaps say something about the general context. This was Cambridge, in the Boston area, probably the most liberal city in the United States, and you can get a picture of what things were like by two events that had just taken place: one about the time of the talk, one a couple of months earlier. October 1965 was the first planned international day of protest against the Vietnam War, and of course the anti-war
activists in Boston wanted to participate in it. So we arranged a demonstration at the Boston Common – essentially the equivalent of Hyde Park, the standard place for public meetings. I was supposed to be one of the speakers. The crowd gathered, but the event never really took place. It was broken up violently by counter-demonstrators. You couldn’t hear the speakers. Real violence was prevented by a big police appearance. The demonstrations – not just in Boston – were bitterly condemned by congressional liberals. The demonstrators were regarded as traitors. How dare they ask these questions! The *Boston Globe*, probably the most liberal paper in the country, devoted almost the entire front page to condemning the demonstrators. That was the general mood.

The next international day of protest was in March 1966, about the time when this talk was given at Harvard. We realised we couldn’t have a public demonstration, it would be broken up violently. So we decided to have a meeting instead at the Arlington Street Church in downtown Boston. The church was attacked – tomatoes, tin cans, and so on. Again, a police presence prevented greater violence. That was the context at the time that this was being given.

Well, despite quite overwhelming opposition, the small number of anti-war activists were proceeding at that time well beyond talks and organising efforts. In March 1965, a year earlier, we had tried to organise a national tax resistance campaign. It was mostly based at MIT, in fact, at the laboratory where I was working, the Research Laboratory of Electronics. By 1966, there were the beginnings of efforts to organise a national resistance organisation, called ‘Resist’. It became public in October 1967, and by 1968 it was the target of the first government trials of the resistance. And again, MIT was pretty much the academic centre, the same lab for the most part.

In February 1967, the *New York Review of Books* did publish the article that had appeared in the Harvard student journal, edited with expanded footnotes and so on. And that was followed, once in the journal, by interchanges and discussions on moving from protest to direct resistance, which by then was pretty much underway. By late 1967, there was a large-scale, popular anti-war movement finally taking shape – much too late, but quite significant in scale and with long-term consequences. That’s the general context in which the article appeared in the *New York Review*. 