

# Ready, Steady, Book Interview with Chris Knight

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Chris Knight is a professor of anthropology at the University of East London, and the author of the highly acclaimed and controversial book, *Blood Relations: Menstruation and The Origins of Culture*, which outlines a new theory of human origins. Chris gives regular talks at the Radical Anthropology Group in London, and will also be speaking at the Communist University in London in August. Chris was talking to regular *RSB* contributor Stuart Watkins and Dave Flynn.

**ReadySteadyBook:** Chris, you started your academic career studying Russian literature. So why anthropology? What made you switch, and what, if anything, does your background in literature bring to both your anthropology and your writing style?

**Chris Knight:** At school, in the sixth form, I was studying maths, physics and chemistry. I loved science but wanted to break out a bit at university. Since my A-levels were in the natural sciences, I was told that I wasn't qualified to apply for an arts degree. I protested and eventually was advised that I could study Russian if I went to Sussex University. This was in 1961. These were the post-Sputnik years, and Russian was widely believed to be something western scientists would have to master in order to keep abreast. I loved Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, but felt completely baffled by the intricacies of Russian grammar. It wasn't like science — it made no sense. The plan was to spend my third year living and studying in Moscow, but in 1964 the so-called 'thaw' came to an abrupt end and I had to go to Paris instead, living with a couple of ageing Russian emigres. They spoke a kind of French except in their intimate moments, when they reverted to Russian. Since I wasn't supposed to be learning French, I didn't even acquire that language properly. In the end, I nearly failed my degree. But I was allowed to do an M.Phil. despite this.

By 1966, I had begun to discover anthropology. But the only academic willing to support my postgraduate application was Robin Milner-Gulland, my extremely conscientious and thoughtful former Russian tutor. Being supervised by Robin meant that I couldn't switch to anthropology — I would have to continue with my Russian. In the end, I wrote a reasonably intelligent thesis on the futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov, whose best-known work is his *Incantation by Laughter*. Khlebnikov dreamed of forging a language of magic spells capable of embracing humanity. Back in 1912, he predicted that an empire would fall in 1917. A dreamy mathematician, he thought he had captured the wave-length of history. I am no poet, but Khlebnikov continues to inspire me.

**RSB:** You have sparked controversy in both political and scientific circles with your theory of human origins. What is your theory, in outline, and why does it seem to get so many people upset?

**CK:** My theory is that we became human in a revolution. In the abstract, this idea is acceptable and even fashionable. Noam Chomsky, for example, argues that a sudden leap forward gave rise to language in our species. In his view, this event was cognitive — it was a transformation of mental structure, perhaps caused by a sudden genetic mutation. A very large number of psychologists, archaeologists and evolutionary theorists agree with Chomsky here. One way of expressing their theory is to say that

language emerged in a ‘cognitive revolution’. To talk of such a revolution is perfectly acceptable. Some theorists might suggest the alternative of a ‘technological’ revolution, referring in this case to the remarkable tool-making abilities of Homo sapiens. This, too, is acceptable. What is not acceptable is to talk about a social revolution. You can talk about social relationships, but not in the context of any kind of revolution. My theory is nothing special. To me, it is blindingly self-evident that the revolution was social. Of course, it is unlikely to have been narrowly social. Any revolution as profound as this would also have had cognitive, technological and many other dimensions. But if you mention the words ‘social’ and ‘revolution’ in the same breath, it upsets the authorities. They immediately assume the worst, accusing you of pursuing a political agenda rather than a scientific one.

**RSB:** You have said that Noam Chomsky, as linguist, is a genius who needs to be overthrown. Why is he a genius? And why should he be overthrown?

**CK:** Why is Chomsky a genius? Just about every theoretical linguist I know says that Chomsky is a genius. Even those who disagree with him seem to agree on this point. The entire modern discipline of theoretical linguistics stems very largely from Chomsky’s pioneering work. I don’t really understand the details, but my problem is that I am not a theoretical linguist. I don’t necessarily feel qualified to judge. If a bunch of nuclear physicists were to tell me that someone in their field was a genius, I would just have to take their word for it.

As for overthrowing him, the problem is this. Chomsky occupies a very peculiar institutional position in the United States and in western society more generally. Both in science and in the arts, he is the most frequently cited intellectual. The anarchist/libertarian left look up to him with enormous respect. Chomsky tells them that his linguistic science is of no special interest to activists. He explains that science and politics are completely different, mutually autonomous kinds of activity. No form of political action can be justified by science, just as no scientific theory can be justified by politics. His personal practice reflects this: his political writings contain no science, just as his scientific writings contain no politics. Or so it seems. Of course, no single figure can be held responsible for legitimizing the chasm between the scientific community and the community of political activists. But if we had to pick on a single figure, it would have to be Noam Chomsky.

The problem is that Chomsky’s separation of science and politics is a myth. His own science — his linguistics — is political through and through. Chomsky defines language as not social. He defines it as an object inside the individual head. He says it doesn’t have any special communicative function — mostly, we use language just for privately thinking to ourselves. He says that the meanings of words are not socially negotiated but wired into the brain in advance as features of the human genome. In my view, to say all this is pure nonsense — stark, raving nonsense. But it is not politically neutral nonsense. To argue for such far-fetched positions is to adopt an ideological stance — that of the liberal bourgeoisie. Chomsky is the most virulent imaginable opponent of social science in general and of Marxism in particular. Since the late 1950s, bourgeois

hostility towards Marxism in western intellectual life has found its most extreme and articulate champion in Noam Chomsky.

Conversely, it is a myth to say that Chomsky's political activism is unconnected with his science. The connection is intimate. Today's most imaginative and effective political activists are constantly engaged with the findings of environmental scientists, earth scientists, economists, anthropologists, historians and others. Could we even imagine today's environmentalist movement without the brilliant environmental science which lies behind it? Against this background, it is positively uncanny to find how little science appears in Chomsky's writings as a political critic. We find no economic analyses, no sociological analyses, no application of theories or findings from any part of the social sciences or humanities. All we find are quotes from newspapers or reports of various kinds, telling a journalistic story. I personally tend to find Chomsky's stories accurate — more accurate than most. I admire his political integrity and courage. But I am suspicious about Chomsky's overall role. My view is that the ruling class are perfectly happy to have Chomsky writing this kind of thing. It doesn't frighten them in the least because it doesn't threaten them — Chomsky goes out of his way to construct and represent himself as a lone voice. In particular, when wearing his activist hat, he ostentatiously removes his scientific one. What would upset the ruling class would be the reverse strategy. What would upset them would be for the world community of scientists to become active while the activists became scientific. Our two communities might then hope to converge on a shared language of self-emancipation and revolutionary change. Chomsky has devoted his life to obstructing any such development. This is why I think he should be overthrown.

**RSB:** You say that Richard Dawkins has got it right with his selfish gene theory, but wrong with his views on religion — the exact opposite of the view generally held on the left! Why?

**CK:** Well, the fact is simply that genes are complex molecules that use the bodies they inhabit to replicate themselves. A gene that replicated the competition at its own expense would not be a gene. Even if the anomaly existed for some reason in one generation, in the next it would not be a gene but an ex-gene. Dawkins used the term 'selfish' to get this vital point across: genes must replicate themselves. That is the fundamental law. But the whole point of sociobiological theory was and remains to explain social behaviour, including especially co-operative behaviour. In a sense, then, 'selfish gene' theory is the science of unselfishness, the science of human and animal solidarity. Modern Darwinism has proved enormously productive because it is materialist and genuinely scientific. Today, there is scarcely one qualified fieldworker studying apes, termites, dolphins or any other species in the wild who is not benefitting from and contributing to this body of theory. Trying to find an exception would be like trying to find a physicist who rejected the laws of gravity.

Among other things, the theory explains conflict: conflict between the sexes, between parents and offspring and so on. It shows how conflicting strategies arise, and how conflicting interests drive evolutionary change. For Marxists, these should be fa-

miliar themes. Most of the middle class ‘left’ refused to read further than the title of Dawkins’ book. Failing to grasp the author’s entire point, they imagined him to be justifying capitalism, racism and so forth. Nothing could have been further from the truth. It was precisely selfish gene theory which exploded the earlier idea that natural selection pitted ‘race’ against ‘race’. The left’s response to this scientific revolution was embarrassingly ignorant and self-destructive. In fact, it was a disgrace. Imagine what Marx and Engels would have thought!

As an atheist and communist, I love Dawkins’ hostility to religion. But as a Marxist, I think it is our job not just to condemn but to understand. I have developed a theory of how religion first came into existence. It is a testable theory, since it specifies what can and what cannot happen in any religious myth or ritual. If my theory is wrong, we should soon know, since one can imagine so many theoretically possible ways of disproving it! I use modern Darwinian premises to explain how religion emerged. My problem with Dawkins is that he steers well clear of all theories which investigate the sexual, social and foraging strategies of evolving humans. Instead, he comes up with the idea that religion is a virus, like a computer virus. Humans suddenly got infected by these things. He says they got infected because children are so dependent on adults. When we are young we have much to learn. We have no option but to trust adults and so become excessively gullible. So religion is essentially an exploitative trick. Marxists can sympathise with this idea up to a point. But there are problems. Why don’t chimpanzees get infected by cultural viruses? More seriously, what about the relationship between religion and collective identity? What about the emotional bonding, the sense of community? Hunter-gatherers believe in all kinds of supernatural entities, and feel empowered by such beliefs. They don’t have priests, no one is exploiting them — and yet they have these beliefs.

To explain religion, we need to go deeper. We need a theory which explains the evolutionary emergence of symbolic culture as a whole. Anyone who explores this topic in any depth is likely to come to discover intriguing details, such as the extraordinarily prominent ochre record. The first substance ever mined was red ochre. The first form of art was body-painting using this ochre. This behaviour has to be explained. The evolutionary anthropologist Camilla Power has come up with an explanation: the pigments were used in female initiation rites. The archaeologist Ian Watts (one of the world’s leading specialists on the ochre record) has endorsed this explanation. One way or another, anyone who tries to explain the facts is likely to arrive at similar conclusions. The human revolution happened. Its outcome was an egalitarian society. I suspect that Richard Dawkins knows about these ideas, feels unsure about their political implications — and has decided not to investigate too deeply.

**RSB:** You’re political commitment is obvious from your work and from this interview. Has your work had any direct influence on your political activity?

**CK:** I would say my political activity has been entirely dependent on my work. To begin with, during my early twenties at Sussex University, I was quite slow to commit to the cause of revolutionary Marxism. In fact, I made the decision only once I knew in my

own mind what the revolution was. It was bigger than the French revolution, bigger than the Russian revolution. The cause I eventually committed to was the human revolution. I reasoned that this wasn't just a hope or dream situated somewhere in the future. The very fact that we have language and consciousness tells us that, deep down, we have won the revolution already: it is part of what we are. The task is to work out how we won the revolution so as to be able to do it again.

So this in turn influenced the way I thought about political activism. My theory specifies that language, ritual and culture can be traced back to the world's first picket line. With this in mind, during the miners' strike I got involved in organising pickets which had a special cultural flavour – with poets, musicians, comedians and others actually on the picket line. This happened at Neasden power station in North London and the whole place was completely closed down for the day. During the Liverpool dockers' dispute, I persuaded Reclaim the Streets to take all their theatrical, musical, carnival and other skills up to Liverpool for the first anniversary of the dispute. This was in September 1996, when we completely took over the quayside, occupied the gantries and gave the dispute a terrific boost.

Over that weekend I met up with the Liverpool School of Samba, who were giving a percussion workshop on the picket line. I was so impressed that on arriving back in London I told my friend Lionel Sims, who teaches anthropology with me at my university. We bought two large drums, joined the London School of Samba and began building up our own samba band with our students. We called ourselves the Barking Bateria. The band came of age when it played a key role in occupying the main campus of the University of East London, leading to a victory against redundancies and, indirectly, to the resignation of the Vice-Chancellor. That was in May 1998. The next year, on June 18<sup>th</sup> 1999, that same samba band led the twenty thousand or so people who converged on the London Futures Exchange, closing down the City for the day. That was when the press first invented the term 'anticapitalist' to describe our new movement. It stuck. We then helped set up Rhythms of Resistance, the samba band of *Reclaim the Streets*. Sister bands then spread across Europe and all over the place. In Seattle on November 30<sup>th</sup> 1999, the World Trade Organization was hit by thousands of trade unionists and environmentalist who had been inspired by the Liverpool dockers. Our sister band there call themselves *The Infernal Noise Brigade*.

One other thing I should add. The world's first picket line was used to organise a sex-strike. It always seemed obvious to me that in the modern world, sex-workers ought to have trade union rights like anyone else. One of my students, Ana Lopes, made this her priority and is now General Secretary of the International Union of Sexworkers. When we persuaded one of Britain's biggest unions, the GMB, to open up a sexworkers branch and link up with the IUSW, history was made.

**RSB:** Anything new in the pipeline? We hear your working on a new book. Can you tell us anything about that?

**CK:** It's about the evolutionary emergence of language.

**RSB:** And what about books generally? What are your favourite books? What must we all make sure we read before we die?

**CK:** Well, everyone should read Malinowski's magnificent Trobriand ethnographies, starting with *The Sexual Life of Savages*. Ignore the lurid title — it's an inspiring, necessary read. W.L. Warner's *A Black Civilization* is another magnificent classic, this time on an Australian Aboriginal tribe. There are hundreds more beautiful ethnographies. Finally, if you haven't read it yet, take a look at my *Blood Relations*. Friends tell me it's almost an encyclopedia. When I look back at it, I ask myself, 'Did I write that?'. Apparently so. It explains the human revolution. I think it's a great book.

**RSB:** Chris, thank you very much for taking the time to answer our questions.  
— Stuart Watkins (02/03/2006)

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